

**PONTIAC** -- Desperate to free jail space, Oakland County officials are contemplating an alternative: They'll foot the bill to keep certain inmates on an electronic tether rather than send them to jail.

Just weeks after the county declared its eighth jail overcrowding emergency in two years, forcing the early release of 266 inmates, officials are ironing out details of a \$200,000 pilot tether program in which the county would pay for the electronic ankle devices for certain inmates with a bond of \$1,000 or less and for those sentenced for certain nonviolent crimes.

Officials hope the program could open as many as 50-75 beds at the 1,828-bed jail -- a significant number given that the jail is often on the brink of overcrowding.

It'll also save money. Tethers cost defendants \$8-\$16 a day with a \$100 enrollment fee compared to \$96 a day for jail.

"Any time we can find an alternative -- a cost-effective alternative -- it frees up both resources and space for those that need to be behind bars," said Sheriff Michael Bouchard.

More than 1,800 inmates have been released early from the Oakland County Jail since August 2005 because of overcrowding. Under the county's current tether program, only pretrial defendants -- those still going through the court process -- can be tethered, and it's open only to those who can afford it.

Tethers can have a global positioning system to track a defendant's whereabouts or can measure the amount of alcohol in someone's blood. The county primarily works with Eastpointe's House Arrest Services Inc.

"At any given time, we have about 60 defendants on some sort of tether," said Barb Hankey, director of the county's community corrections department.

But under the new pilot program, officials hope to see even more.

Aside from tethering defendants with low bonds, the program would also allow judges to sentence defendants to a tether if they meet certain criteria.

No domestic violence or criminal sexual conduct cases would be allowed, though certain drug offenses or operating under the influence of alcohol as a first or second offense would be.

The key to the program's success, officials say, will be getting the county's judges on board. Two district courts, Novi and Waterford, along with the circuit court have agreed to pilot the program.

"You have to get buy-ins from the judges," Bouchard said.

And that can take time, said Russ McPeak, director of Macomb County's community corrections department, which oversees a similar tether program started for indigent defendants in December 2005. Macomb has 50 to 60 people in its program at any one time.

"We've got unused funding for it, and (judges) don't use it as much as we would like," McPeak said.

That's why Oakland Chief Circuit Judge Wendy Potts acknowledges marketing will be important with Oakland's program. She said judges who may have had philosophical problems with using tethers or questions about their technology will have to be sold on how the new program covers rich and poor alike and how tethers have evolved.

"This is a whole marketing job, and we're willing to do it," she said.



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